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**Business models for communication departments:
a comprehensive approach to analyzing, explaining and innovating
communication management in organizations**

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Purpose – The question of whether and how communication departments contribute to organizational value creation has rarely been addressed in research. Such evidence is crucial, however, as communications competes internally with other functions (e.g. marketing and human resources) for budgets and staff. This article fills the gap by applying the business model concept, an established approach from management theory and practice, to communication units.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on an interdisciplinary literature review, the authors propose the Communication Business Model (CBM) as a new management approach for communications. To this end, pertinent definitions, frameworks and typologies of business models are analyzed and combined with insights from corporate communications literature.

Findings – The CBM outlines the generic architecture of business models for communication departments. Such models describe the basic principle of how such a unit operates, what services and products it provides, how it creates value for an organization and what revenues and resources are allocated.

Research limitations/implications – The approach stimulates the debate on communication units as objects of observation when researching communication management practices. Further research with appropriate empirical methods is needed to identify and study different types of business models for communications.

Practical implications – The CBM can be used as a management tool to analyze, explain and innovate communication management in organizations. It is a fertile approach for communication practitioners to make the work of their department visible and to position themselves internally and externally.

Originality/value – Transferring a well-known concept from general management to communication management enriches the value creation debate in theory and practice. It allows communication leaders to align their work with organizational goals and make it accessible to top management and other decision-makers in the organization. It also opens up new avenues for research and education.

Keywords – Business model, Communication departments, Communication management, Management tool, Leadership, Value creation

Paper Type – Conceptual Paper

Introduction

In today's increasingly complex world with a dramatically changing media landscape, companies rely on corporate communication leaders and their teams to manage multiple aspects of giving and negotiating sense internally and externally (Berger and Meng, 2014). Communications is acknowledged as a central component of an organization's success (Cornelissen, 2020; Ragas and Culp, 2021). This is reflected in rising expectations and more diverse areas of responsibility for communication departments in business practice (Raywood and Butcher, 2021). However, within the internal competition for responsibilities and resources, communication leaders rival with other functions such as marketing or human resources (HR) and need to justify their contribution to organizational success. After all, spendings for communications only make sense if they create tangible or intangible value, either directly (e.g. by stimulating employee engagement or generating profit) or indirectly (e.g. by building trust or securing the license to operate).

The extensive debate on measurement and evaluation of communications (Buhmann and Likely, 2018; Ji *et al.*, 2021; see also the special issue Vol. 23 No. 3 of this journal) has explored these issues in detail. In practice, however, debates on communication value are often limited to the question of whether specific communication goals have been achieved. Furthermore, meeting communication objectives is not an indicator of whether the financial and personnel resources add value to the organization as a whole or to another focal entity (e.g. business units, national subsidiaries). Instead, communication departments and their leaders need to ensure that communication objectives are aligned with the overall corporate strategy (Volk and Zerfass, 2018) and demonstrate what value is created through communications and how this can be utilized for the organization (Buhmann and Likely, 2018).

This challenge has been addressed by two research streams so far. On the one hand, researchers have developed various models to explain value creation through communication activities *in general* through safeguarding reputation, creating trust, fostering employee engagement, handling crises, etc. (e.g. Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Riel and Fombrun, 2007; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017). On the other hand, there is also a more *specific* debate about how the communication function should best be organized and managed. This has stimulated the development of maturity models, benchmarking approaches, strategies for developing competencies and positioning communication departments, or for using digital technologies to optimize internal workflows (e.g. Berger and Meng, 2014; Brockhaus *et al.*, 2023; Brockhaus and Zerfass, 2022; Fleisher and Burton, 1995; Johansson *et al.*, 2019; Zerfaß *et al.*, 2022). A pioneering approach which combined both research streams is the *Excellence Theory* by Grunig *et al.* (2002), which explored how communication activities can make an organization more effective and the characteristics of communication functions that are likely to make this happen.

What is lacking, however, is a *holistic perspective focusing on communication departments in organizations*, which combines and expands insights from those debates on the concrete level of organizational units with specific mandates, resources and activities. Communication departments (which have to be differentiated from the overall communication function; see below) usually provide a variety of services to different internal clients, ranging from monitoring public opinion, content production and

relationship management to coaching and advising executives. Ultimately, top management will neither be interested in generic debates about the impact of communications, nor in detailed evaluations of operational activities, but in the overall value created by each communication unit that is staffed and funded within the organization.

This article suggests using the business model concept, an established approach from management theory and practice, to fill this gap. It is the first and major output of a large-scale academic–professional collaboration that includes the development of the *Communication Business Model (CBM)* approach, the development of an instrument for assessing business models of communication departments in practice, a pilot study in which the instrument was applied to 53 different communication units in one industry, and the utilization of the approach for the executive education of communication practitioners in three countries. This article explains the conceptual framework. It starts with the definition of key concepts, gives an overview of existing research on value creation through communication in general and by communication units in particular, introduces the business model concept from management research, and combines this knowledge to develop the CBM approach. The article explains its dimensions, shows how the framework can be used in practice, and concludes with an outlook on future research that can extend this line of thought.

Key concepts: communication management, functions, and departments

Researchers and professionals use many different and somehow overlapping terms and concepts to describe the practice of using communication to reach organizational goals. Without going into too much detail, it is important to clarify the understanding used in this article before linking the debate in our field to the management discourse on business models.

Conceptually, it is necessary to distinguish (a) professional communication activities and processes between different actors in society from (b) management processes used to steer those activities by different actors and (c) organizational units or people that are in charge of managing and executing communication on behalf of those actors. Depending on the authors, terms like communication management, strategic communication, integrated communications, public relations and corporate communications are used interchangeably for all or only some of these aspects (Nothhaft and Zerfass, 2023). In the following, all varieties are considered, using businesses and other organizations that are at least partially focused on generating profit as examples – although the rationale also applies to other types of organizations.

A leadership and practice-oriented approach requires a holistic perspective on corporate communications (Argenti, 2023; Cornelissen, 2020; van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). Accordingly, *corporate communications* encompasses all communication processes that are relevant to the emergence, constitution, management, and future development of businesses – in short, communications by, in, and about companies. This includes processes initiated by the organization as well as communication processes by third parties in which companies or their products, brands, and representatives are the object,

e.g. when journalists report on a company or stakeholders discuss it (Zerfass and Link, 2022). These activities affect knowledge, attitudes, actions, relationships, etc. in social life and thus, can create (or destroy) value for all actors involved.

Communication management can be conceptualized as steering and shaping communication activities and processes in organizational contexts by means of planning, organizing, leading and controlling (Brønn, 2014; Gregory, 2018). Such management activities are necessary to use communication to achieve organizational goals, and they are specific for each actor involved.

The *communication function* comprises the totality of tasks focused on managing and executing communication activities within an organization (Zerfass and Link, 2022). This definition goes hand in hand with organizational theory and management practice (Lassl, 2020). It puts communications in line with other cross-sectional functions such as HR, financing, research and development, and information technology (IT), as well as with primary functions such as procurement, production and sales. The overall communication function and subfunctions like employee communications or public affairs are usually performed by a variety of people, teams, internal units and external entities on behalf of an organization. Board members and C-level executives communicate with key stakeholders as part of their roles; agencies plan and run campaigns; employees act as corporate ambassadors on social media; HR and marketing departments are in charge of employee or product branding; and communication or public relations departments reach out to a broad range of other stakeholders. This practice – which is rarely reflected in theories that attribute the responsibility for all kind of communication tasks to either public relations or marketing – is theoretically underpinned in the concept of the “communicative organization” (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023a, pp. 213–220; Heide *et al.*, 2018).

A *communication department* is an organizational unit that is responsible for the governance, management and execution of functional communication activities in a company within a defined area of responsibility (Cornelissen, 2020, pp. 27–32; Zerfass and Link, 2022). Large companies will have different communication units with varying mandates – for example, a global corporate communications department in the headquarters; communication departments in business units, regions, or countries; and several communication units or teams as part of other business functions like finance (investor relations), HR (employer branding), or sales (customer relationship and events). Communication departments are usually staffed with *communication practitioners* who have professional expertise in the field and therefore shape the direction of the respective function beyond their own department, support other members of the organization with communication-related tasks, offer advice on business decisions and implement various communication activities.

Corporate communications require considerable resources in terms of budgets and personnel. From a leadership perspective, it is necessary to assess whether and how this contributes to value creation. So far, little attention has been paid to communication departments as a unit of analysis to demonstrate their value contribution. Research in this area has focused on case studies or the attempt to find the ideal set up of communication departments including budgets, staffing or processes. It is often overlooked that

responsibilities and structures must always be based on the respective corporate strategy, and that there is no set standard for how communication units should be organized (Elken *et al.*, 2018; Moss *et al.*, 2017; Raywood and Butcher, 2021).

Research on value creation and communication units: overview and research gap

The debate on value creation has been one of the most important topics for communication management theory and practice in recent decades. Defining goals that matter to an organization and measuring and evaluating the impact of communication activities that are aligned with these goals remain key challenges (Buhmann and Volk, 2022; Volk, 2016). The reason is quite simple: Communication units, like all other departments, compete internally for responsibilities, resources, and recognition within an organization. However, they often fall behind because their profile, activities, and contributions are not clearly identifiable. This is becoming increasingly important as the range of services provided by communication units rapidly expands and changes. In times of digital transformation, restructuring, and cost savings, workflows need to be optimized and scarce resources need to be aligned with strategy. Communication departments need a clear vision and value proposition to signal their relevance to top management. However, many practitioners trust that achieving communication goals is enough to legitimize their actions within the organization and miss the big picture when explaining the value contribution of their unit. This is evident when communication leaders report on their success in terms of key performance indicators (KPIs) for easily measurable media outputs or successful campaigns (Buhmann and Likely, 2018), rather than providing a holistic picture of what they do for whom in the organization. Thus, they fail to demonstrate their business acumen and explain their performance in the language of management (Ragas and Culp, 2021).

Our literature review shows that previous research has provided answers to the question on value contribution through communication on two levels. A *generic debate* explores how communication activities support organizational goals and which intangible or tangible assets are created this way. A *functional debate* focuses on the structures, processes, people, workflows, and resources used by organizations to manage and provide such communication activities. We will outline both research streams in short and show that a holistic view is only available for the first perspective, while a framework for analyzing and optimizing communication departments in a comprehensive sense is missing until now.

The generic perspective: how communication creates value for organizations

Researchers in our field have developed various models to explain value creation through communication activities in organizational contexts. Communication not only constitutes organizations (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019); it can also be used to acquire resources for business activities and create tangible and intangible assets (Cornelissen, 2015; van Riel and Fombrun, 2007; Zerfass and Link, 2022). An obvious contribution of communication is generating attention and attracting customers, distributors, talent, or others needed to fulfill the purpose of the organization. This is intensively discussed in marketing communications research (de Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2021). Much research has also focused on concepts that address the orchestration

and integration of communication activities to convey a consistent corporate identity and achieve a favorable corporate reputation (Cornelissen, 2015). Researchers stress the importance of alignment between the public image projected by an organization (corporate identity), the organizational culture lived by senior managers and employees, and the general perception of an organization among key stakeholders (corporate reputation) (Carroll, 2013; Cornelissen, 2020; van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). In a similar sense, corporate and product brands help to attract consumers and potential employees (Burmam *et al.*, 2023; Iglesias *et al.*, 2022). The integration of identity, reputation, and brands is associated with positive outcomes such as employee engagement or customer satisfaction. Non-alignment, on the other hand, can have a negative impact such as loss of sales or support (e.g. Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011).

Establishing and maintaining “mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Broom and Sha, 2013, p. 29) is something else that can be fostered by communications and is valuable for organizations (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Ledingham, 2021). Nurturing productive relationships is a prerequisite for successful interactions with external stakeholders such as journalists, politicians, regulators, and customers, but also for fruitful collaboration within organizations, e.g., between top management, team leaders and employees (Men, 2014; Men and Tkalac Verčič, 2021).

In times of stakeholder activism, environmental threats, and global conflicts, crisis resilience is becoming ever more important for organizations (Gregory and Willis, 2023). Communications can contribute to this primarily by listening and monitoring relevant issues (Macnamara, 2016). Digital tools such as social media, sentiment, or big data analysis can be used to identify issues to avert damage (van Meer and Kroon, 2023). In crisis situations, communicators often take on the role of negotiators, managing (strained) relationships between organizations and stakeholders (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023b).

Our brief overview shows that communication can contribute to value creation in many ways – from orchestrating communication activities to creating consistent images to mitigating crises through listening and monitoring. This makes it difficult to explain the potential impact of communications and to take informed decisions in practice. What is needed is a *holistic perspective* that combines different explanations. The Communication Value Circle (CVC) is such a comprehensive approach (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023a, pp. 201–209; Zeffass and Viertmann, 2017). It systematizes communication goals in twelve dimensions (employee commitment, customer preferences, publicity, reputation, brands, corporate culture, thought leadership, innovation potential, crisis resilience, legitimacy, trust, relationships) and links them to four generic dimensions of corporate, business or functional goals (enabling operations, building intangibles, adjusting strategy, ensuring flexibility). It can be used as a management tool to review and align communication goals to organizational objectives. The framework has been successfully applied by many businesses. However, it tells us – like the generic perspective in general – nothing about the structures, processes, people, resources and workflows needed for professional communication in organizations.

The functional perspective: how communication is managed and executed

Another research stream in communication management focuses on the structure and organization of the communication function (e.g. the communicative responsibilities of different actors like top managers, executives as part of their leadership role and communication professionals) and of communication units specifically.

The most elaborated discussion in this area focuses on communication activities and products that can be used to reach communication and organizational goals. A plethora of research has investigated established and emerging media and channels (personal communication, press relations, advertising, events, sponsoring, social media, etc.) as well as potential cognitive, affective and behavioral effects (e.g. enhancing knowledge, shaping perceptions, raising emotions, stimulating action). The complexity of decisions related to these core activities of communication are captured by various systematizations, e.g. the PESO model of content distribution which helps practitioners to distinguish paid, earned, shared and owned media and combine their respective strengths (Dietrich, 2020).

However, communication and media practices continue to evolve in our deeply mediatized societies (Hepp, 2020). If TikTok is the latest trend today, another channel may be *en vogue* tomorrow. This has implications for the setup of the communication function: The popularity of channels like LinkedIn, for example, can lead to new workflows and processes (e.g. in content creation) and a new distribution of responsibilities (e.g. between specialized communication professionals and coworkers acting as employee ambassadors; see Andersson, 2022). Debates in this field are linked to research on roles and competencies needed to perform corporate communications. Various approaches discuss different role profiles of communication managers and, in particular, communication leaders (Berger and Meng, 2014; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017; Gregory and Willis, 2023; Tench *et al.*, 2017). For instance, internal advising and coaching roles are becoming more important as employees are increasingly active on social media and speak about or on behalf of the organization (Brockhaus *et al.*, 2020). Applications based on artificial intelligence (e.g. ChatGPT) create new challenges and opportunities for communicators and organizations alike.

Most research in this domain deals with the communication function as a whole. Surprisingly few authors focus specifically on communication departments as organizational units. Nevertheless, a key question which has long been addressed is how communication departments should best be set up and organized. The *IABC Excellence Study* identified characteristics of high-performing communication departments, e.g. by fostering a participative team culture and a formal alignment with top management (Grunig, 1992; Grunig *et al.*, 2002). Although the study has many limitations, it provides extensive and meaningful insights into the structuring of communication departments (Moss *et al.*, 2017). In contrast to the normative Excellence study, the *Comparative Excellence Framework* for communication management (Tench *et al.*, 2017) can be used as a dynamic tool for assessing communication departments and for establishing quality control systems. Empirical data suggest that the setup of communication departments depends on different aspects such as the size or structure of an organization (Moss *et al.*, 2017). To identify opportunities for improvement for communication units, maturity models (e.g. Johansson *et al.*, 2019) and

benchmarking approaches are viable options. While excellence refers to an attribute for outstanding practices in managing communications, maturity characterizes the state of a communication function, department, or activity field in relation to “a desired or normally occurring end stage” (Mettler, 2011, p. 83). Benchmarking on the other hand “is the process of systematically identifying, analyzing, and adapting industries’ best practices to improve an organization’s performance” (Boxwell, 1994). This helps to classify one’s own resources against the background of industry standards and can help communication leaders to explain changing demands for financial and personnel resources (Zerfaß *et al.*, 2022).

These overarching concepts are complemented by a few studies that try to systematize different contributions of communication departments within an organization (Zerfass and Volk, 2018) or the internal positioning and acceptance of such units in organizations (Brockhaus and Zerfass, 2022). Moreover, communication units are often focused in research on the digitalization of communications and the use of communication technology (CommTech) (Brockhaus *et al.*, 2023). Digital transformation is a concrete phenomenon that needs to be broken down to concrete workflows, tasks, resources, outputs and management processes (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023). This has been researched for some practices such as content creation, e.g. in the debate on corporate newsrooms (Seiffert-Brockmann *et al.*, 2021; Moss, 2021), but not for the broad range of tasks and activities in communication departments.

Although communication departments as organizational units have not been widely studied, they are the most important point of reference in practice. From a managerial point of view, responsibilities and resources are regularly assigned to specific departments or teams, and not to corporate communications as a general set of activities. Ongoing debates about process optimization (e.g. through digital tools) or competence development (e.g. for utilizing the opportunities of big data and automation) need to be applied to concrete settings and situations. The same is true for benchmarking and maturity models, which require a focal object for comparison and optimization – which is usually a communication unit (Johansson *et al.*, 2019). Most importantly, those who are in charge of assessing and optimizing corporate communications are usually the leaders of those departments, especially Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) who oversee the overall strategy and governance for corporate communications (Bolton *et al.*, 2018). They need a holistic view on communication units to identify problems and opportunities for improvement, put team members and external agencies on the same track, prioritize tasks and resources, and explain the respective missions, strategies, activities, and values created to everybody involved in a consistent way.

Such a *holistic view on communication units* is missing until now. We propose to close the gap by applying the business model concept to communication departments. Business models are a proven way to analyze, explain, and innovate the service portfolio and value contribution of organizations and subunits. So far, the business model approach has only been discussed for communication and media agencies (Bennin and Kapoor, 2017; Jensen and Sund, 2017; Ragas and Culp, 2021, pp. 165–174), but not for in-house departments. While agencies are forced to explain explicitly what they deliver to clients in order to legitimize their billing rates, it is usually unclear which products and services are delivered by in-house communication departments, what value is created, and how and with what resources this is done.

Towards a holistic view on communication units: the business model concept

Business models have attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners in many disciplines over the past 25 years (Chesbrough, 2010; Coombes and Nicholson, 2013; Nielsen *et al.*, 2020). Information technologies, globalization, the quest for sustainability, deregulation, protectionism and faster innovation cycles have disrupted traditional ways of doing business (Nielsen *et al.*, 2020; Wirtz, 2020). Companies are forced to rethink and innovate how they do business. Business model management helps companies to develop new business ideas, examine existing activities, and modify their strategies and structures to meet changing requirements (Wirtz, 2020, p. 3).

Definitions, frameworks and typologies of business models

Although there is a remarkable number of publications and scholars around the business model concept, there is still no generally accepted definition of the term (Jensen, 2014). A literature review reveals that scholars and consultants have developed multiple frameworks to outline key components of business models (Perić *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, two aspects are combined in all definitions and frameworks: the *creation and delivery of value for stakeholders* – in most cases referred to as customers – and the *way of capturing value for the organization* – mostly, but not always focused on economic profits (e.g. Afuah, 2004; Baden-Fuller and Morgan, 2010).

A comprehensive *definition of business models* has been proposed by Johnson *et al.* (2008) in their seminal *Harvard Business Review* article: A business model “consists of four interlocking elements that, taken together, create and deliver value” (p. 60) – a customer value proposition, key resources, key processes, and a profit formula. Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) state that a “business model describes the rationale of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value” (p. 14). According to Wirtz (2020), a business model serves as “a simplified and aggregated representation of the relevant activities of a company” (p. 57) and is based on partial models describing key components like revenues, resources, market offers, etc. (pp. 103–133).

Business model frameworks highlight key components of business models and explain them as well as their interaction in detail. The *Business Model Canvas* by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) uses nine blocks to cover four main areas of business: customers, offers, infrastructure and financial viability reflect the logic of how a company intends to make money. Gassmann *et al.* (2020) employ a conceptualization that consists of four central dimensions: the Who, the What, the How, and the Value, unified in a “magic triangle.” Defining a target group (Who?) clarifies who will be addressed with specific products or services. The value proposition defines which products and services (What?) are offered. The way of producing these offers (How?) is described with the value chain, based on resources and capabilities. The profit mechanism describes how a company generates value and revenues for shareholders and stakeholders (Value).

Moreover, scholars and practitioners have always been concerned with the analysis and identification of *business model typologies*. From an analytical point of view, Wirtz (2020) distinguishes technology-oriented, organization-oriented and strategy-oriented business models. Gassmann *et al.* (2020) have empirically analyzed successful business model innovations over the last 50 years. They abstracted these to identify common patterns, resulting in a typology of 60 business models that can be used by practitioners to review and innovate existing approaches. One example is the *solution provider*. This business model “offers customers an all-inclusive package that takes care of all tasks and problems in a certain area” (e.g. web services) and “helps them to concentrate fully on their core activities” (Gassmann *et al.*, 2020, p. 292). This is typically done by consolidating a range of products and services through a single point of contact. Revenues are driven by the ability to build long-term relationships, reduce customer price sensitivity, and use upselling opportunities.

Application of business models

Business models can be used to analyze and design value-creating activities on the corporate, business unit or product level (Afuah, 2004; Wirtz, 2020, pp. 57–61). Different companies can pursue the same business model (e.g. being a “solution provider”) in various industries with completely different outputs. At the same time, different companies can offer similar products or services (e.g. on-demand, short-distance transport of people) based on quite different business models (e.g. taxi companies as a “service provider” and Uber using a “peer-to-peer” approach).

Within one and the same company, several business models can be applied simultaneously and in different combinations. For example, software companies can create more value by combining a “freemium” model (offering free basic versions with upsell options) for private users with a “licensing” model for business customers.

Business models for organizational units and departments

As a generic management tool, business models can also be applied to corporate functions and organizational units. This is rarely discussed in mainstream discourse. Nevertheless, an extensive literature review has revealed several applications in HR, training and development, IT management and intellectual property (IP) management – but not in corporate communications.

Oertig (2007) proposes an *integrated HR business model*. This includes, for example, a service center, which combines operational, highly standardized HR processes and transactions, as well as a center of expertise, which unifies specialized HR expertise and methodological know-how. Gärtner (2013) presents four typical business models for HR that represent different ways of value contribution; for example, the “resource manager”, where services are limited to administering personnel, and the “resource generator”, where innovative services are delivered to top management and other organizational units. Carliner (2004) used the business model concept to explain how *training and development departments* can transition from delivering training services to providing performance consulting by bringing in novel

capabilities and processes that lead to new revenue streams and a growing internal influence. Bergmann (2019) proposes that *IT departments* have to position themselves as service brokers, who bundle external and internal services based on the requirements of the business, instead of focusing on governance and support approaches. Last but not least, Le Mauff (2021) transfers the Business Model Canvas by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) to *Intellectual Property (IP) departments*, who have to manage patent applications, but also keep trade secrets and deal with numerous legal restrictions in various markets. The author extends the nine blocks of the canvas to make IP assets explicit and identifies specific targets for using the IP departments' resources in a valuable way for the organization.

Business models for communication departments

Combining the previously explained understanding of corporate communications and communication management with the business model concept makes it possible to define business models for communication departments in a concise manner:

A business model for a communication department describes the basic principle of how such a unit operates, what services and products it provides, how it creates value for an organization, and what revenues and resources are allocated.

Two *specific aspects* need to be considered when applying the business model concept to communication departments. The first systematic difference to business models on the corporate or business unit level is that products and services are not provided for external customers but for the company itself or for other departments, divisions, etc. The work of communication departments and its results must be valuable to those internal clients or partners. Secondly, with a few exceptions (shared service centers, licensing income for brands, etc.), value is not created at the level of the communication department, but elsewhere in the organization. For example, employee communication activities can increase motivation and reduce fluctuation, which can lead to a higher productivity in production plants and lower recruitment costs in HR departments. This places specific demands on the allocation of expenses and revenues.

Using the business model approach to analyze and explain the activities of communication units has *several advantages*. Most importantly, a holistic and established scheme reduces complexity and helps communication leaders to explain to top executives and internal clients why, how, for whom, and with what they are working. Business models can be used to guide team members as well as external agencies and service providers. They can be analyzed with regard to their logical consistency and their fit with higher-level business models and strategies. Methods of business model innovation can be used to revise and continuously adapt value propositions, structures, processes, resources and revenue streams to new challenges (Wirtz, 2020, pp. 159–185). Last but not least, the business model concept provides a much-needed counterpoint to the “one best way” delusion that dominates large parts of the discourse in corporate communications. Since most companies pursue different business models at the same time – e.g. in the holding, in different business units, in different countries – it would be naive to demand that all

communication departments in an organization or in an industry create value in the same best way. Even within a single department, different business models can be pursued if various services and products are provided in different ways at the same time.

The Communication Business Model (CBM) approach

The framework shown in Figure 1 outlines a generic architecture of business models for communication departments. The CBM approach has been developed by underpinning the core definition with key elements identified in the research literature (see above), and by matching them with the experience of a management consultancy specialized in benchmarking and restructuring communication departments in one of the world’s five largest economies. It comprises four elements with which central characteristics of a business model can be described, discussed, and further developed. Each of the four elements is further differentiated by a sub-model that describes concrete dimensions, which can be empirically tested, evaluated, and further developed. This provides a link to established systematizations, concepts and measurements in theory and practice. Individual practices can be benchmarked on this level, e.g. how content management is best organized, what best-of-class LinkedIn channels look like, or how reputation as an immaterial value created by communications can be measured and assessed.

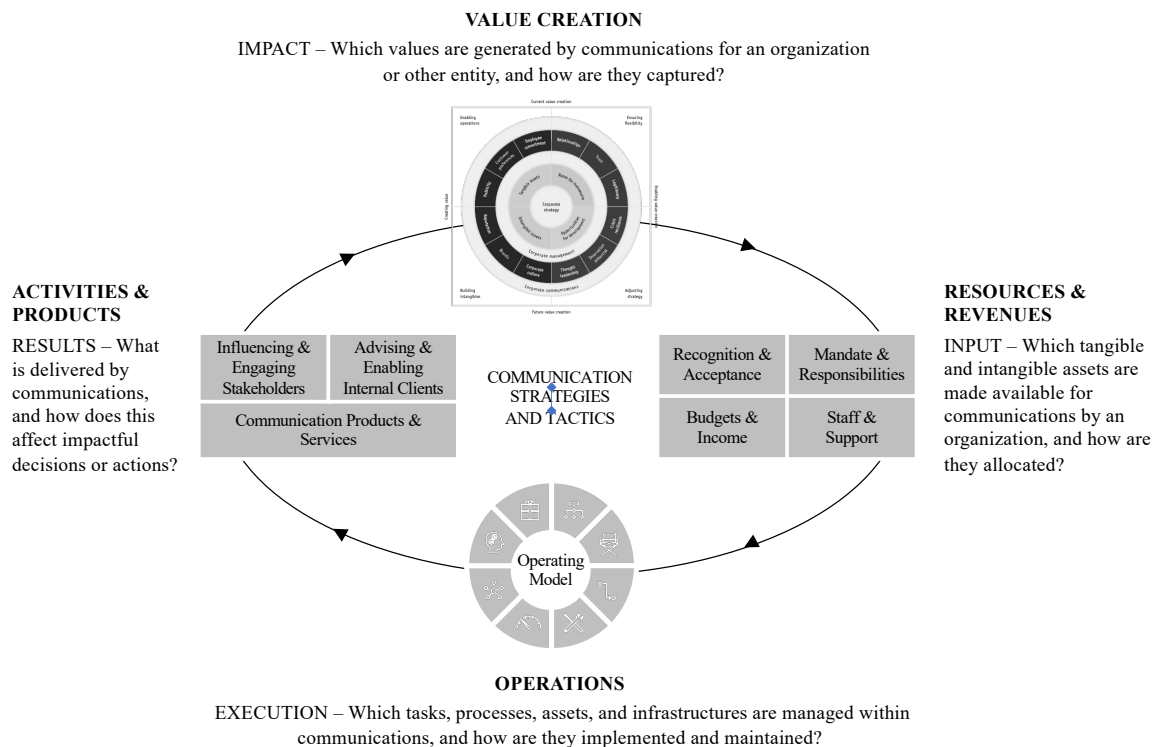


Figure 1. The Communication Business Model (CBM) framework.

Source: Zerfass & Lautenbach Sass.

The CBM framework helps to describe different business models of communication units by mapping their entire value creation process: from the provision of necessary resources by the board or internal clients based on the organization's objectives (input), through tasks and processes of combining and transforming resources (execution) and the resulting activities and products (results), to the intangible and tangible values that are created for the organization as a result (impact). If this is successful, resources for the communication unit and practitioners (in the form of salaries, bonuses, promotions) are provided or increased in future periods. This is where the gain component manifests itself as the core component of any business model (revenues).

Sub-models

The four sub-models of the CBM describe the key elements of a business model for communication departments in more detail. These dimensions can be further operationalized in research or consulting projects:

1) The *resources and revenue model* defines which tangible resources (budgets, internal billing costs, staff positions, rooms and facilities, technology) and intangible resources (in general: internal recognition and acceptance; specifically: mandates and responsibilities) are made available to a communication department and how the success of its work is captured as revenue for the department and its members. This can be explained, analyzed, and innovated by identifying current and potential resources and revenue streams, considering additional options, and by evaluating volatility and expandability. It makes sense to focus on resources and revenues that can be influenced by activities within the unit's operating model. Established management tools such as cost accounting, financial decomposition, process analysis, internal client surveys and external or internal benchmarks can be used when working with this model.

2) The *operating model* (Figure 2) describes which tasks, processes, values, and infrastructures are managed, implemented and further developed in a communication department. This includes organizational structures and coordination routines, leadership culture and competence development, the management of partner networks and knowledge management (including analytics) as well as governance, work processes (e.g. content management, campaign management, internal coaching) and methods as well as digital services and the management of editorial content, visuals, contacts, brands, or stakeholder insights. This can be analyzed and optimized by reflecting on the set ups, workflows and decision-making processes as well as the constellation of people, culture and technology in the department. By doing so, bottlenecks, pain points and drivers of success can be identified. The best way to optimize the operating model is to focus on the primary and secondary activities that have the highest impact on the key output defined in the activities and products model. Methods that can be used here are process, network, competency and budget analyses; measurement insights from stakeholder communications; data analyses; as well as benchmarks and advice from (internal) management consultants.

Mission & Alignment

- Self-conception of communications
- Positioning within the organization
- Alignment with organizational strategy

People & Culture

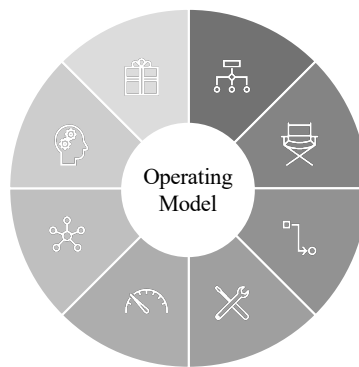
- Leadership culture and values
- Competency management
- Recruiting and talent management

Partnering & Network

- Functional and technical network
- Expert and content-related network
- Legitimacy and informational network

Insights & Knowledge

- Information retrieval and monitoring
- Information use and data analytics
- Knowledge management

**Structure & Coordination**

- Positions, roles, and responsibilities
- Reporting lines
- Coordination and decision-making bodies

Governance & Steering

- Resource allocation (budgets, staff, data)
- Policies, guidelines, and quality management
- Performance indicators and reporting standards

Processes & Methods

- Stakeholder communication processes
- Internal advising processes
- Work methods and management tools

Technology & Assets

- Digital infrastructure and tools
- Digital services and assets
- Databases and content

Figure 2. Dimensions of the operating model for a communication department.

Source: Zerfass & Lautenbach Sass.

3) The *activities and product model* defines which products (e.g. content in various formats, social media channels, magazines, trade shows, events, branding manuals) and services (e.g. issues monitoring, media training, consulting) are provided by a communication department. It also explains how communication products and services are intended to change the knowledge, attitudes, or behavior of stakeholders or internal clients so that their future decisions or actions have a positive impact on the organization. This is typically done by influencing external or internal stakeholders, by enabling internal clients (e.g. top executives, other departments, business units) to communicate themselves through coaching, or by helping them fulfill their respective tasks through internal advice. Analyzing and optimizing this sub-model requires a detailed understanding of what products and services are delivered to whom, how they are used, what they trigger, and which impactful activities are then performed by stakeholders (e.g. engaging, supporting, purchasing) or other members of the organization (e.g. informed business decisions, autonomous communication). Activities and products should be prioritized based on efficiency and effectiveness, which can be done by aligning with the value creation model. A variety of methods can be used here, such as measurement of media and outreach activities, and client surveys.

4) The *value creation model* clarifies which values the communication department creates through its activities for the overall organization or for internal clients. It is essential to identify value links between the impact of communication activities or products and overarching objectives. An established framework that helps to address this issue is the CVC (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017), which has been explained in the literature review above. It systematizes communication goals in twelve dimensions and links them to four generic dimensions of corporate, business, or functional goals (enabling operations, building intangibles, adjusting strategy, ensuring flexibility). This framework can be utilized for the business model approach. Typically, communications can support top and middle management as well as coworkers and organizational units in many different ways. This often leads to high demand and pressure on

communication departments and professionals. One way out is to build value propositions based on the relative importance of internal clients and their willingness to provide resources.

Practical application of the CBM and its sub-models

Business model frameworks can serve as a *management tool* (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015), i.e. a method used by organizational leaders and consultants to discuss, analyze, evaluate, plan and innovate the key logic and core elements of their business on different levels (Magretta, 2002; Wirtz, 2020, pp. 14–17). Using a well-established and easily understandable scheme helps to achieve a higher level of abstraction which is necessary to make sound decisions (Wirtz, 2020, p. 59). Managing with business models reduces complexity (Bridgeland and Zahavi, 2009), highlights relevant information that is necessary to develop successful strategies (Wirtz, 2020, p. 59), makes it easier to identify potentials, opportunities, and risks of current business activities (Eriksson and Penker, 2000) and thus helps to adapt and modify them (Wirtz, 2020, pp. 235–246).

Communication leaders can build on the rich experience in management practice when applying the business model approach to communication departments. While it will be hard to find expertise in the communication profession, it should not be too complicated to seek advice and support from in-house or strategic management consultants. Of course, those experts will have little or no knowledge of corporate communications; therefore, sound expertise in this field must be brought in by communication practitioners or consultants. The CBM framework expands the existing range of *management tools for corporate communications* (Volk and Zerfass, 2021); it helps to leverage the performance of communications.

Specifically, the approach can be used in the following ways:

(1) *Analyze and evaluate.* The business model framework can be used as an analytical tool to take stock of the current situation in a structured and comprehensive way. Top management and communication leaders can identify how various communication units in an organization operate, what they deliver, how they create value, and how this value is captured. To this end, the overall model and the sub-models must be operationalized. All dimensions need to be assessed by appropriate means, such as reflecting practices in team meetings, reviewing internal documents, interviewing internal clients, etc. A newly appointed CCO could use the approach to get an overview of the situation, and long-term leaders could apply it to future-proof their department. Business models for communication departments are always unique – they cannot be benchmarked against each other or evaluated against generic standards. However, it is possible to assess whether they are logically consistent or inconsistent; whether they are appropriate or not suitable for a particular corporate communications strategy; and whether they are aligned with overarching business models of the organization. Moreover, individual dimensions of the models can be compared within or across organizations, as outlined above.

(2) *Explain and position.* The framework and the sub-models can also be used to describe in a consistent and understandable way how different communication units in organizations operate and how they create value. Focusing on key questions and elements, visualizing them and explaining the logic

behind everything reduces complexity and facilitates cooperation within the organization. In this case, detailed data are less relevant – it is the overall storyline and the “big picture” in familiar business terms that counts. Communication leaders can explain their department’s core business model or various concurrent businesses to guide team members and to position themselves and their unit within the organization (Brockhaus and Zerfass, 2022). A simple exercise that any CCO could start with is to ask oneself and the leadership team to explain what the department does in no more than 100 words, referring to the elements of the CBM. This can lead to statements like the following from a pharmaceutical company with a communication department that is geared to the “service provider” model:

Our communication department leverages deep industry knowledge¹ and personal networks¹ to produce world-class content on treating rheumatic diseases² and inform audiences over owned and earned media.² This inspires consumers to ask for our medicines,³ prescribers to trust us,³ and pharmacy graduates to rank us as an employer of choice.³ High-profile sales and excellent young researchers drive corporate profits³ and secure competitive advantages³ that are on top of the board’s agenda. This makes us a trusted service provider for all divisions,⁴ secures our internal resources,⁴ and generates bonus payments.⁴

¹ Operations; ² Activities & Products; ³ Value creation; ⁴ Resources & Revenues

Results from such an elevator pitch can be discussed within the team and serve as a starting point for developing a common understanding. Repeatedly conveying this self-conception can help to channel the expectations by others in the organization and gain more appreciation.

(3) *Innovate and redesign.* The business model approach can also serve as a management tool for continuous improvement. Communication leaders can use it to ensure that the overall direction and key elements of managing and executing corporate communications in their department are transformed and enhanced whenever internal demand or external factors change. Such efforts will often focus on subtopics like aligning communications with new corporate or business unit goals; revising the portfolio of communication services in the light of a rapidly changing media landscape and audience behavior; integrating digital technology to update internal workflows; or leveraging new revenue streams to expand resources. Apart from such incremental changes, it may sometimes make sense to completely redesign existing business models for communications. For example, the traditional “service provider” model of the pharmaceutical company outlined above may no longer make sense if high-quality health content can be generated and distributed by software applications based on artificial intelligence (like ChatGPT). Changing to another business model, e.g. an “advising and coaching” model focusing on monitoring public debates and identifying business opportunities and risks, or a “facilitating relationships” model that creates value by initiating dialogue with key stakeholders to develop markets and secure legitimacy, could be an option here. Business model innovation requires thorough assessment, as in the first scenario, but also a good

understanding of corporate goals and communication trends, a willingness to learn from alternative solutions and models, and strong leadership to drive internal change.

Contributions and implications for research and education

The potential impact of the CBM approach on the profession and communication leaders is evidenced by the use cases above. However, it is also important to highlight the contribution to the body of knowledge in communication management as well as to academic education and continuous training in the field.

As outlined in the literature review, existing *research on value creation through communication* mostly adopts a generic perspective, explaining how communication activities support organizational goals and what value is created. This is complemented by research on communication functions, which addresses more tangible questions about how these value-creating activities are managed and implemented by different actors in the organizational environment. However, this research is quite scattered and seldom focused on communication departments as the units that bear primary responsibility for this function. The CBM approach fills this gap by integrating previous research on functional aspects (e.g. on structures, processes, roles, competencies, content creation and distribution, services, digital infrastructure, self-positioning; see Brockhaus and Zeffass, 2022; Dietrich, 2020; Grunig et al, 2002; Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023; Moss, 2021; Moss et al., 2017; Tench et al., 2017) with insights from the generic debate on multiple dimensions of value creation (Falkheimer and Heide, 2023a; Zeffass and Viertmann, 2017). It does so by taking a holistic view on communication departments. This connects communication management research, which often oscillates between rather general debates (about the impact of communication in society and business) and very specific questions (how practitioners deal with typical challenges), with research in general management, which has long identified organizational units as important entities that need to be understood and analyzed. The CBM approach supplements existing research on the performance and management of other functional units such as audit, legal, tax, or research and development departments (Basri, 2016; Cangemi and Singleton, 2013; Collier, 2017; Robinson et al., 2010).

Further research based on the business model approach is certainly needed. It can focus on various areas, but only a few will be addressed here. First, empirical methods to study business models in practice are needed to gain deeper knowledge of communication departments. An approach developed in one of our subsequent projects is a qualitative self-assessment with gamification elements that can be used by communication leaders and their teams to identify existing sub-models and business models. Preliminary results indicate that the method works, at least in organizations with an open and collaborative team culture. Second, there is a need to explore the potentials and pitfalls of using the CBM in management practice. The approach enables communication leaders to explain their activities in the language of management and enhance their influence within the organization. However, careless application or micropolitical processes can also suppress productive reflection and perpetuate inferior arrangements. This could be investigated with qualitative designs and action research. Third, while there is no best way for a

communication business model (as all organizations are different), it makes sense to identify and classify prototypical business models for communication departments as points of reference. This could be done conceptually, by transferring existing typologies from the business model literature to the communications field, or – following the path taken by Gassmann *et al.* (2020) – inductively, by examining communication departments in an ongoing and large-scale study and compiling the results. In this context, collaboration between academia and practice could be most fruitful. In particular, consultants who have access to diverse organizations and high expertise on using management tools can apply the CBM framework and enrich the scientific debate with practical insights. Initial results from a pilot study conducted give hope that the inductive approach will be successful: The analysis of 53 communication departments in one industry led to the identification of four distinct business models.

Another field that can be inspired by the business model approach is *communication management education and training*. It has been argued that communication practitioners need to speak the language of management, acquire business acumen, and learn how to use management tools in their areas of responsibility (Ragas and Culp, 2021; Volk and Zerfass, 2021). The CBM contributes to this debate since it can be applied by lecturers as a holistic framework to explain the role of communication departments and to discuss potential changes due to societal, economic or technological developments. Initial applications of the CBM in full-time graduate programs on communication management at both a research university and a triple-accredited business school in Europe have proven to be successful. The approach seems even better suited for continuing education and leadership training. Two cohorts of mid-level and senior-level communication practitioners enrolled in an executive program at another business school found it easy to apply the framework and analyze their own departments as part of their assignments. However, a systematic evaluation of such applications for education and training is not yet available. This will be a challenge for the future, which in turn may contribute to the educational discourse, which is beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion and outlook

This article has demonstrated how the business model concept can be integrated in the body of knowledge of communication management research by applying it to communication units. The CBM approach contributes to the value creation debate by filling a gap in existing research, which has paid little attention to the organizational units that are mainly responsible for the governance, management and execution of corporate communications. The holistic perspective integrates existing knowledge and helps to analyze, explain, and innovate communication units. From a practical point of view, this is extremely important as mandates, resources and activities are assigned on that level. Beyond that, we have tried to show that linking corporate communications with management theory and current challenges of the profession is a fruitful way to generate novel thoughts for our field. This can stimulate debate between theory and practice – which is a worthwhile goal in itself.

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